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ABSTRACT

Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, a journalist and speaker, headed a back-to-Africa movement in the second half of the nineteenth century that was one of the first black rhetorical movements to meet the challenges of institutionalized racism in the United States. Turner was a preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, becoming first an elder and then a bishop. He edited and published his own newspaper for 20 years and was also elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1868. In these prominent positions, Turner gave fiery speeches calling for blacks to reject the United States and return to Africa. Only a few blacks actually did emigrate to Liberia, and these returned to tell horror stories of death and disease. Turner's use of effusive and biting language to defame his detractors, however, and his strong, visceral appeal to the oppressed black masses were precursors to Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa movement and the 1960s rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and the Muslims. Turner's dream of the black people achieving honor, dignity, and recognition in the eyes of humanity symbolized the longings and aspirations of the oppressed black masses throughout the United States. (CC)

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# THE RHETORIC OF BISHOP HENRY MCNEAL TURNER, RENOWNED SPEAKER AND JOURNALIST

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One of the first significant rhetorical movements designed and spearheaded by Black people in the United States to meet the challenges of institutionalized racism was the Back to Africa movement of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, a journalist who gained much of his prominence in rhetorical communication. Little is known of Bishop Turner as a journalist or rhetorician, for his movement was overshadowed by the more palatable counter movements of his contemporaries, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, the latter a journalist and speaker in his own right.

Turner rose from very humble beginnings in South Carolina where he suffered the bitterness, cruelties, and inhuman conditions of being black. Working beside slaves, though not one himself, he nurtured his dreams to become a minister to black people and some day lead them out of slavery and into "manhood". He fulfilled his dreams by first becoming an itinerant Methodist preacher, traveling throughout the South until he became a member of the AME Church.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church had been founded in protest to discrimination and injustices practiced on blacks by the white dominated churches of America, and one of its purposes was the uplifting and education of black people. Since Turner had experienced such widespread ill treatment and since its purposes and his were the same, the AME church was exactly what he needed to be a part of.

Turner rose to prominence in the church and the black community very quickly, exploiting every available opportunity for education and service to his community, as well as the nation in general. As pastor of the prestigious Israel AME Church. Turner urged blacks in 1863 after the Eman-

cipation Proclamation to arm themselves to protect their new -found freedom; he also urged their active fighting in the Union Army for which he was appointed chaplain to the Black troops, and later chaplain in the regular army assigned to the Georgia office of the Freedman's Bureau. For awhile despite the discrimination suffered earlier, Turner showed confidence in whites and believed they were really interested in the true emancipation of blacks.

Turner's faith and belief in whites began dwindling when he was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1868 and was expelled, along with the other twenty-eight, on grounds of color. It was in the speech that he delivered in opposition to the resolution calling for their expulsion that we are given a glimpse of the theme that runs throughout Turner's Post-Reconstruction rhetoric that addresses itself to why black people have on other alternative but to leave the United States for Africa.

In the speech before the legislature, Turner realized that it mattered little what he said, for expulsion of all the black members was a foregone conclusion. In light of the outcome, he demanded his right to speak and to "hurl thunderbolts at the men who would dare to cross the threshold of his manhood".[1] He warned the audience in his speech that he would not defend a country which did not reciprocate.

> The black man cannot protect a country, if the country cannot protect him; and if tomorrow a war should arise, I would not raise a musket to defend a country where my manhood is denied.[2]

He told the white assembled that he did not intend to take his expulsion lightly, and that he would fight to the end. To the blacks he proclaimed:

> White men are not to be trusted. They will betray you... Don't fight for a country that refuses to recognize you... Black men...this thing means revolution.[3]

Though Turner and the others were allowed to serve out their tenure of office, discrimination continued. He met with it again and again as he attempted to work within the system. He finally retreated to the black church, concluding that America was a white man's nation and that blacks should leave, preferably for Africa, for "there is no manhood future in America" for black people.[4] In the church he became a frequent writer for the Christian Recorder, as well as contributor to other church related papers. He later founded his own newspaper and was editor and publisher for over twenty years.

From 1872 his speeches and writings were filled with the hopelessness of blacks in the United States and the reasons for their dejection. He gathered his followers from among the poor, uneducated blacks of the South who felt the dejection about which Turner talked. They wanted the dignity, the self-respect and pride about which all the black leaders talked, but somehow felt it unattainable following anyone else but Turner.

Turner's biggest problem to overcome, next to funding, was convincing skeptical blacks to go to Africa. Not only did he have to combat the myths circulated by whites concerning Africa, but he had to deal with blacks who had been completely taken in by the anti-Africa rhetoric. Despite these difficulties, he was able to handle his audiences superbly, for he knew them well. As is the practice with most successful speakers, Turner studied his audiences; he knew their every mood, their preconditioned reactions to every argument, and he knew the kinds of appeals that they responded to most favorably.

In speaking to African emigration he appealed to their sense of duty and loyalty to their fellowmen, their sense of dignity and pride, and their fervent belief and trust in God. He often chided black skeptics with words to this effect:

> We are the descendents of Africa and as such have no more cause to abhor the land of our fathers than other races have had. And yet I challenge and instant since the dawn of creation where people have ridiculed the land of their fathers to the same extent as the Negro.[5]

With a pen and tongue as sharp as a sword, he charged white people with almost total ignorance when they created disturbing myths about Africa, and charged black people with stupidity for believing the myths without examining the source.

> Whites condemned the Negro in all respects--his color, his hair, his mouth, his nose, lips, language, manner and laugh, and to coronate their scorn and obloquy, they condemn his country. And we, in our folly, have united with this vicious and garbage box calvacade...These profaners in some instances knew no more of geography than the man in the moon; they were merely trying to amplify the utterances of some venomous-hearted and ignorant-headed white maniacs.[6]

Because of Turner's fiery manner, his radical nationalist views, and his rejection of the United States, the older more established members of the church contested his election as one of the twelve bishops of the church. They lost, however, for his following of young activist members and ministers gave him an overwhelming vote. With this election, his African emigration campaign gained significant momentum. As bishop he could speak more freely and with more authority than he could as a mere elder in the church. People began considering his speeches and writings capable of influencing large numbers of blacks and mounted attacks against him on the platform and withing the pages of influential, widely read white newspapers..

Bishop Turner was undaunted by the opposition of people like Frederick Douglass and Henry Tanner, his toughest adversaries. In response to some leaders, Turner was straightforward, blunt, but courteous. To others he showed his utter outrage at their thinking:

> If all the riff-raff white men worshippers, aimless, objectless, selfish, little-souled and would-be white negroes of this country were to go to Africa, I fear it would take a chiliad of years to get them to understand that a balck man or woman could be somebody without the dictation of a white man.[7]

This is the kind of language and biting sarcasm that greeted the opponents of Turner's emigration scheme. This is the kind of language that made him so appealing to the masses. The language, his style, his purpose did not do much to win Turner friends from among the group that opposed his emigration views, but his followers enjoyed his blunt, open manner, his colorful, sometimes coarse language, and his ability and willingness to attack racial oppression and the evasive, ambiguous prattle of both black and white spokesmen. No better parallel can be made to Turner's language and style than that of Stokeley Carmichael and Rap Brown of the sixties. Their plans for black people in the United States may have been different, for they advocated integration rather than separation, but their use of harsh, effusive, biting language to defame their detractors, and their use of strong visceral appeals to the oppressed masses of blacks were the same.

Turner's rhetoric grew in intensity with each adverse argument presented to him. Even after some blacks who had managed to emigrate to Liberia with all intentions of staying returned to tell dreadful stories of death and disease from fever and inclimate weather, he still held fast. He called it "ridiculous nonsensical jargon", and said that it charged "God with folly". Moreover, being sick or dying with fever in

Africa was better than dying at the hands of a lynch mob in the United States. He later called those who returned "Human buzzards" and "lazy sloths" who did not go to Liberia with the necessary capital, self-reliance, race pride, and common sense; that Liberia was "no place for the mere kitchen pimp" looking for "scullion employment or some white man to curse and kick them around."[8]

Not only did Turner speak out against the government and other white-owned and controlled institutions and activities in the pages of his newspapers, VOICE OF MISSIONS and VOICE OF THE PEOPLE, but he denounced, in venomous language, black people and organizations that did not support his views on emigration. He called his critics "scullion negroes" who lacked goals to do anything about their conditions. He called the northern educated blacks who continued to attack him "mushroom pimps who know how to scribble on paper for the press". In one scathing rebuke of his opponents, Turner said,

> For any educated black man who will take his carcass and trot it around as a waiter in some white man's hotel, restaurant, whiskey saloon, barbershop or any place where his race is denied accommodation, and then wag his tongue or shove his pen to denounce Africa is nothing but a white man's scullion, and whoever supports or endorses him, be he lawyer, doctor, merchant, preacher, bishop, teacher, editor, legislator, congressman or farmer is also a race scullion.[9]

Bishop Turner's emigration movement can be viewed as a revolutionary agitation campaign that was directed against entrenched conditions that had existed for years in the social, political and economic order of the United States as it related to black people. Turner had tried to alter the degraded position of blacks in the country, but did not experience any measurable success. Recognizing that any program for change would be

fruitless, he set out to remove black people to Africa where they could build a model nation replete with freedom, dignity, justice, equality and the opportunity to create and perform to their fullest capacity.

Though the movement itself cannot be judged successful in terms of its outcome, the impact of the language, the strategies and the appeals used by Turner makes it quite successful. Not only can we see Turner in the subsequent Back to Africa Movement of Marcus Garvey, but in the sixties in the movements toward integration spearheaded by Stokeley Carmichael and Rap Brown and certainly in the rhetoric of the Muslims (Balalians).

Even in Turner's writings and speeches that were basically religious in nature, he spoke of the necessity of the black man building within himself pride and dignity in being black. The agitators strategies and substance are still apart of his religious discourse, but the content and form are more poetic, less harsh, and more structured.

In a speech delivered in 1898 as Turner was attempting to instill in the minds of his listeners a sense of pride in being black and also Christian, he admonished his audience for thinking that all the white man had told them about themselves was true. In his berating the Anglo-Saxon language that deemed everything "satanic, corrupt, base, and infamous is denominated black, and all that constitutes virtue, purity, and innocence is represented white"[10] he told them that a people who did not see themselves as having been created in the image of God was indeed devoid of pride and love of self. He believed himself created in the image of God, thus he believed, "God is a Negro". This idea has been constantly reiterated in militant separatist philosophies in this country ever since.

Just as the Muslims were called haters of whites, twisted and ridiculous for thinking of Allah as black, Turner was accused of being demented, for no sound-thinking Christian would ever use such unpardonable, blasphemous language.[11] Turner considered the reports of his demented condition a compliment and capitalized on the narrow-mindedness of their conclusion. He wrote:

> ...as long as we remain among the whites, the Negro will believe that the devil is black and that he favors the devil, and that God is white and he bears no resemblance to Him....We have as much right biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negro, as you buckra or white people have to believe that God is a fine looking symmetrical and ornamented white skinned...blue-eyed, straigh haired, projecting nosed, compressed lipped, and finely robed white gentleman[12]

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Turner's movement, as well as the black movements of the sixties, was the awakening of pride in the minds and the hearts of the black masses and the feeling of hope for a better future, if not for themselves, then certainly for their children. Turner's dream of the black man achieving honor, dignity and recognition in the eyes of mankind symbolized the longings and aspirations of the oppressed black masses throughout the United States.

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